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## **State of emergency declared as weather worsens Australia wildfires**

by Alastair Jamieson, Staff writer, NBC News

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A state of emergency was declared in the Australian state of New South Wales Sunday as weather conditions worsen the chances of containing raging wildfires – with the scenic Blue Mountains most under threat.

Premier Barry O'Farrell made the declaration after weather forecasts showed a dangerous combination of warm, dry weather and strong winds were likely to hamper the efforts of firefighters.

Fire officials are considering the mandatory of up to 25 townships across the Blue Mountains, the wilderness west of Sydney that is one of the country's tourist hot spots.

"It looks like three big fires in the area could merge together on Wednesday, which could be disastrous," one fire official told NBC News on condition of anonymity.

One man has died and more than 200 properties destroyed in blazes that have raged across the Blue Mountains, the Southern Highlands and the Central Coast over the past five days.

Firefighters battling some of the most destructive wildfires to ever strike the state were focusing on a major blaze near the town of Lithgow, which is burning on a 190-mile front.

Authorities warned high temperatures and winds were likely to maintain a heightened fire danger for days.

"A declaration of emergency gives the emergency services additional powers to deal with whatever eventualities may arise," O'Farrell told reporters in Sydney. "We hope that won't matter. But these powers include the right to order the public to leave or to enter an area, the right to shore up or demolish a building and of course, it also prevents people from disobeying an order given under these powers."

Officials said temperatures in the fire zone on Sunday exceeded 77 degrees Fahrenheit, winds reached 12 miles per hour and humidity dropped to 30 percent.

Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said the weather was forecast to deteriorate further over Monday and Tuesday.

"This is a continuing volatile, difficult, dangerous firefighting environment and based on the forecast, based on the size of these fires, it's expected to become a whole lot worse yet," Fitzsimmons said.

Astonished Sydney residents watched on Thursday as a thick pall of smoke from the fires in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney moved across the city over some of its best-known landmarks, including the Sydney Opera House and the Harbour Bridge.

Mark Greenhill, mayor of the Blue Mountains, told Australian broadcaster ABC that strong winds posed a huge threat to the area.

"We have predictions of wind speeds increasing from 50 kilometres per hour through to Wednesday it may be 100 kilometres per hour, he said. "We have a significantly difficult couple of days ahead."

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